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James Mavor and His World

An Exhibition of Books and Papers Selected from the James Mavor Collection

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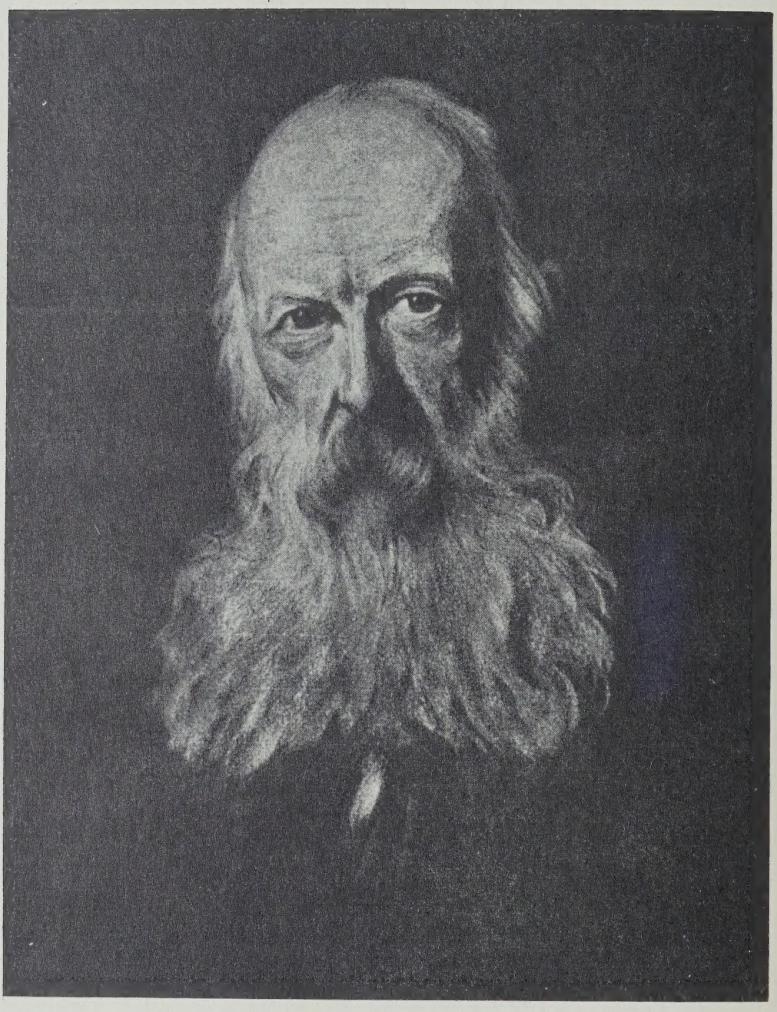

James Mavor

JAMES MAVOR, 1854-1925

In the eighteenth century, Edinburgh was the centre of a great intellectual renaissance. However, in the nineteenth century, Glasgow came into her own in the realms of science and technology; and, toward the end of the century, in art, architecture and engineering she attained world recognition. James Mavor was a product of this city's expansiveness with its emphasis upon education, its brashness, its inquisitiveness, and its contributions to the outside world.

The eldest son of the Rev. James Mavor, M.A., of New Aberdour, Aberdeenshire, he was born in Stranraer, Wigtownshire, in 1854, where his father was a teacher. There, the family numbered among its friends Sir John Ross, the Arctic explorer, sparking young Mavor's interest in this kind of venture and leading to his close connection with V. Stefansson many years later. His maternal grandfather, John Bridie, was a sea captain out of Dundee engaged in all branches of the Baltic and Far East trade. He once had to spend a winter in Russia, and his wife and daughter joined him there for some time. This daughter, Mary Ann Bridie, later Mrs. Mavor, brought up her children on stories of Russia and imbued several of them, notably James, with a passion for all things Russian. This too was to have a lasting effect upon his later career. After the family moved to Glasgow in 1862, Mavor attended the High School, said to have been founded in the 12th century. Among its famous "old boys" Adam Smith is the best known.

As the oldest of 9 children, Mavor was obliged to leave school when very young. Apprenticed to a dry-salter at an early age, he was able to continue his education by attending evening classes at Anderson's College, later the Royal Technical College and forerunner of our modern technical colleges. This sort of education coupled with an early friendship with the inventor, Sir William Thompson, (Lord Kelvin), led directly to Mavor's extraordinary bent for science — extraordinary, that is, in one who was to become a man of letters and a patron of the arts. As a school boy and as a young man he often visited an optician's shop where he watched with fascination the development of Kelvin's inventions of the electrical balance, the syphon recorder, and improvements to the mariner's compass. It was Kelvin, too, who turned all four of Mavor's brothers to electrical engineering and their pioneering in power generation, the Glasgow tramway system, and later the establishment of Mavor and Coulson Ltd., at one time the world's third largest coal-mining machinery manufacturer.

Completing his studies at Anderson's at 19, James Mavor was able to attend classes at the University of Glasgow under Professors John Nichol and Edward Caird. Unfortunately an attack of typhoid fever brought his formal education to an end. It is indicative of the atmosphere in his home and in Glasgow at the time that none the less he was later able to become one of the most learned men of the day.

After leaving university, Mavor returned to the business world for a time. Here he furthered his studies in economics and busied himself with social work. He saw and felt deeply the effects of the industrial revolution upon his country and city. As many as 40 families might be crowded into one dwelling, "in a state of congestion almost incredible." In a moving speech of 1892 he wrote, "Oh, the gauntness, the desolation, the emptiness of life, the hopeless weary waiting for death — in these teeming rabbit-hutches that men call home and live and breed and die in!" It was these conditions which turned him toward socialism and active participation in the many socialist organizations which began to make their appearance in this period. But his economic orthodoxy led him to reject the Marxian theory of value; and his personal experience with Hyndman and his followers disclosed the authoritarianism which Mavor later held to be inherent in Marxism. Thus, in December 1884 with William Morris he was one of the signers of the founding Manifesto of the Socialist League, which under Morris's leadership seceded from the Social Democratic Federation. Although he withdrew from active participation in its affairs after 1886 he remained a friend of Morris until the latter's death. One of the interesting letters from Morris in the Mavor Collection alludes to Mavor's break with the Socialist League in 1886. In the same year Mavor became intimate with the emigré Russian anarchist, Prince Peter Kropotkin and some of his followers.

He worked for the Kyrle Society which attempted to help the desperately poor of Glasgow, not by charitable doles but by instruction and advice. He was one of the founding directors of the Glasgow Workingmen's Dwellings Company which aimed at providing inexpensive and sanitary housing for the poor. These and other activities led to his lifelong friendship with Sir Patrick Geddes who was doing pioneer work among the poor of Edinburgh and whose work in town planning is world renowned.

Mavor chaired or attended meetings for Morris, Kropotkin, Edward Carpenter and many socialist, suffragist, Home Rule, co-operative and Ruskinite groups until the early 90's. He also joined the Glasgow Fabian Society and formed close and continuing contacts with Pease, Shaw and the Webbs. These activities and experiences whetted Mavor's interest in the study of Political Economy, which intensified as his belief in socialist panaceas lessened. By 1888 he had met and established contacts with economists in France, Germany, Austria and America. He became a member of the economic section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

In 1889 he was appointed Professor of Political Economy and Statistics at St. Mungo's College. He lectured as well at the University of Glasgow under Edward Caird, and at the Glasgow Athenaeum in the same subjects. He gave popular courses to working men at various institutions being particularly concerned that science be taught popularly, thus following the example of Thomas Huxley. In an incredibly short time he established himself as the foremost British expert on labour colonies, co-operative societies,

unions and other systems of production and social organization. *The Scottish Railway Strike* (1891) and *The English Railway Rate Question* (1894) established his professional reputation and "if one were to name the eight or ten leading British economists" wrote W. J. Ashley in 1892, "Professor Mavor would certainly be among them." By this date he had sufficiently retreated from socialism as to attempt to gain the Liberal nomination in one of the working class districts in Glasgow.

Mavor's knowledge of the literary and artistic circles of Scotland and England was also extremely wide. Always deeply interested in these fields, he was also very enthusiastic about causes. Thus when a small group of Scottish artists, known as the Glasgow School, began in 1888 to wish for an outlet to explain themselves to the public, the *Scottish Art Review* came into being, with Mavor taking over as editor almost at once. His numerous connections with the literary world were extremely useful. It soon became evident that the magazine must take on an eclectic tone, as the interest of those who had originally floated it began to fade. Even so it was shortlived, and is remembered to-day as an interesting experiment, with unusual contributors whose work was enhanced by the fine printing and design of Walter Blaikie of Constable's. It is typical of James Mavor's astonishingly versatile mind that at the same time as he was editing the *Scottish Art Review* and corresponding with Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo), William Sharp (Fiona MacLeod), Arthur Symons, W. T. Stead, W. B. Yeats and many other well known literary figures of the day, he was also the Scottish editor for the purely technological magazine, *Industries*. These tasks were, of course, in addition to a heavy teaching load.

This, then, was the man who took over the chair of Political Economy at the University of Toronto in 1892. It was as though a small tornado had hit Canada. He was instantly caught up into the life of the university and the cultural life of the country.

A portion of his private log which he kept to send home to Scotland in weekly installments has survived to tell of his early impressions of the city which was to be his home for the rest of his life. Under the heading, Hasty Judgments, Sept. 1, 1892, he wrote:

> "The Torontonese are rather English than American. Their accent is distinctly good, their manners are agreeable, and their public men, so far as I have seen them, are much more like English public men than the typical Yankee man of affairs is."
>
> "It would be too much to expect any men of really first-rate powers in the position of statesman in a province of a colony, and yet one or two whom I have met impressed me very much... Sir Oliver Mowat, the Premier of Ontario, impressed me as a capable man... quite clear-headed, though old-fashioned in his ways of thinking, not democratic by any means; but very honest and desirous of doing the best for his province. He has been prime minister for 20 years, a dangerously long

period for any man to rule a couple of million people and probably a reign not to be repeated. . ."

"Toronto is a great nest of educational institutions. One of the chief political questions is the separate school question. The whole air is full of educational administration, much of it in the agony of being born."

"President Loudon is a very quiet man, reported to have a huge knowledge of university affairs. Type — highly domesticated; library — meagre to common; said he could not keep it in order because children made ducks and drakes of it. Obviously true. Children were quite right for nothing else could be made of it."

"Culture seems a kind of craze in Canada. What they mean by it is perhaps hazy even to themselves; but they undoubtedly have a yearning for something which is not specie."

It was in this last area that Professor Mavor may be said to have seen the greatest need. In many respects his efforts in Canada put his avocations ahead of his vocation, and he was soon actively engaged in the struggle to fill the cultural vacuum. One can name only a few of his endeavours.

His passion for art caused him to work tirelessly, arranging for travelling exhibits as well as for the exhibition of the work of resident artists. "A nation or a city loses much in possible vitality which does not cherish its artists and encourage them by discriminating appreciation and appropriate opportunity," he writes in his *Notes on the objects of the Toronto Guild of Civic Art*, 1898. It was no accident therefore that he was a member of the founding committee of the Art Gallery of Toronto which came into being in 1900, eleven years before Mavor's friend Goldwin Smith left "The Grange" and its grounds to the City to serve as a base for a new gallery. In 1918 the extension to the Gallery was opened. When Professor Mavor died in 1925 he had just retired as head of the Exhibition Committee, a job which he had performed free of charge for 25 years. Among his Canadian artist friends were Homer Watson, G. A. Reid, Walter Alward, E. Wyly Grier, Edmund Morris, R. Tait Mackenzie, Charles Dunbar, Robert Harris and Horatio Walker whose arresting study of Mavor serves as a frontispiece for Mavor's autobiography.

Among his other concerns were the promotion of young writers (for example Ernest Thompson Seton and Marjorie Pickthall); the making of arrangements for visiting lecturers and actors (both W. B. Yeats and Sir Philip Ben Greet were personal friends); and the encouragement of geographical and archeological efforts. As money was always scarce, his help often consisted of saying the right word to the right person at the right time. It was Professor Mavor who wrote the letter of introduction carried by his former student, Charles Currelly, to a specialist at the British Museum. This contact led to Currelly's association with Sir Flinders Petrie and an expedition to Egypt. The articles brought back from that trip were unpacked by members of the Mavor family and laid on three trestle tables

in West Hall of University College for an exhibition. From this small beginning and the joint efforts of Mavor, Sir Edmund Walker and Mrs. H. D. Warren would grow the foundation of the Royal Ontario Museum.

Thus while Mavor was never a patron of the arts in the sense of contributing money to them, in an extraordinary way he served as a catalyst, generating cultural and educational institutions capable of future growth and permanent value to the community in which he lived.

Mavor's impact upon the university was of a more controversial nature. For his first fifteen years in Toronto, his eccentricities and bohemian behaviour shocked the puritanical members of the community. As one of the last foreign teachers appointed to a major Toronto chair before 1900, he was resented by the nativists. The Senate of the university constantly intrigued against him, the faculty objected that he had no degree, and many students, less mature than those in Scotland, frequently objected to his anecdotal and discursive lectures. Fortunately, to many influential people both within and without the university, his wide knowledge of the world and especially of arts and letters came as a breath of fresh air. Sir William Van Horne, Goldwin Smith, George Tait Blackstock, Sir Andrew Macphail and other notable Canadians became close friends. In university circles it was frequently the faculty in scientific fields who were attracted to him. These included Ramsay Wright, J. C. McLennan, John Galbraith, A. P. Primrose, J. P. McMurrich and many more.

By 1912 the atmosphere of hostility had begun to change. Mavor was given a PhD. by the Senate of the university in recognition of his voluminous writings and his very real contribution to the life of the university.

He was responsible for the building up, not only of the Department of Political Science but of the many faculties which evolved from it, such as Commerce and Finance, Sociology, etc. Among his appointments to the Department were R. M. McIver, Vincent Bladen, Harold Innis and Gilbert Jackson. Among his students can be numbered Maurice Cody, R. H. Coats, creator of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Dalton Wells, Chief Justice of Ontario, W. Ross MacDonald, former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, and Adelaide Macdonald, first woman lecturer in Political Economy at the University of Toronto and later private secretary to the Hon. Paul Martin.

Much of Mavor's professional endeavor went into the writing of economic reports on many subjects. Some were the result of his own curiosity in events and were published under his own name. Others were written for private individuals or for companies; and many were at the instigation of the British and Canadian governments and were published as government documents. The checking of details involved endless travelling, upon which he seemed to thrive, even under rugged and often primitive conditions. The last case of the exhibition contains a fair sampling of his writings. At this

point one can only mention in passing some of his government sponsored work. His report written in 1893 on the labour colony system of Germany. Holland, Belgium and France was published as a British parliamentary paper. A report on the whole question of immigration to Canada was sponsored by the Canadian Department of the Interior and published in 1899. The Ontario government asked him to look into the Workman's Compensation Acts of Europe, and his report was published by the Government in 1899. In 1900 he conducted negotiations between the Copyright Association and the Authors' Society in England and the Canadian Authors' Society in Canada, which led to the passing of the Fisher Copyright Act in 1900.

No account of James Mavor's career is complete without a reference to his famous *Report to the Board of Trade on the North West of Canada, with special reference to wheat production for export.* The report, which was received with what he has aptly described as "passionate hostility", contained nothing of a sensational nature. Mavor was approached by the Board of Trade of Great Britain to make an inquiry into the agricultural production of the Canadian North West, and in 1904 he travelled throughout the entire area, building upon information which he had been consistently collecting for six years. In his own words: "It contained simply a recital of the principal facts which I was able to ascertain after sifting the evidence carefully. I explicitly refrained from making any forecasts or estimates... The net conclusions were to the effect that the cycle of dry and moist years involved important fluctuations in yield, that the country which was being opened for settlement was not all equally fertile, that a great increase in the farming population of the Canadian North West was indispensable before the country could be counted upon to produce nearly sufficient wheat to supply the demands of Great Britain." Despite vilification by the British and Canadian Press, the legislatures of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Prime Minister Laurier, the Governor General Lord Gray, and his Ottawa protégé Mackenzie King, all Mavor's ideas weer proved to be correct within his life-time.

One of the most publicized activities in which James Mavor became involved was the migration of the Doukhobors from Russia to Canada. Prince Peter Kropotkin, Mavor's old friend, visited the Canadian North-West in 1897. He was particularly interested in seeing how the Mennonites had obtained land on the prairies. Large blocks had been granted to them which allowed them to settle in villages instead of on the customary individual homesteads of 160 acres, and they were thus able to maintain their own form of communal organization.

Kropotkin was quick to point out that this system would be of great benefit to the Doukhobors, a group of Russian pacifists whose plight had moved both Tolstoy and himself. In 1898 they enlisted the help of James Mavor who was able to gather all the pertinent facts and place them before Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior for Canada. After some delay, aid for immediate expenses came from Tolstoy (who later was to give the

proceeds of the sale of his book, *Resurrection*), from the English Quakers, and from an odd group of Tolstoyans in Purleigh, Essex. The Canadian government granted land to the Doukhobors in what is now the province of Saskatchewan. They had permisison to settle in communities, with the assurance of immunity from military service.

Two thousand Doukhobors arrived early in 1899, the largest mass immigration which Canada had ever handled, and about 6000 were to follow. Mavor was asked by the Canadian government in April of 1899 to go to Saskatchewan and see how the settlement was progressing and the passages in his autobiography describing his experiences on this and subsequent visits provide fascinating first hand information on this extraordinary group. His correspondence with government officials and with various Doukhobors and their friends is one of the strengths of the Mavor Collection. Hundreds of letters written to him have survived: those of Peter Verigin (Peter, the Lordly), the spiritual leader of the Doukhobors who followed his people to Canada in 1902; of Herbert Archer, the Purleigh Tolstoyan, who moved from England to Saskatchewan to live with the Doukhobors and was subsequently regarded as a spy by them; of Joseph Dietrichs, brother-in-law of Count André Tolstoy; of Frederick Godsal who sold his Alberta ranch to a group of Doukhobors and remained their steadfast friend and admirer.

Mavor himself could not have been more staunch in his support. Sometimes his support took the form of trying to persuade the Doukhobors to change or to conform to Canadian ways when he could see that it would be of benefit to them; but generally he interceded warmly on their behalf. Two instances might be cited, both having to do with the unfair expropriation of Doukhobor land. The first case was in 1906, just after the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Clifford Sifton's successor as Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver, reinstated the Dominion Land Act and insisted that the Doukhobors could no longer live communally. In the end, despite Mavor's pleas on their behalf, many Doukhobors lost their holdings and eventually about 6000 of them moved to British Columbia under Verigin's leadership. The other notable case was Mavor's protest against the scheme after World War I to expell the Doukhobors (who had, of course, refused to fight in the war) and to give their land to returned soldiers. His *Open letter to Sir Thomas White* had its effect. Arthur Meighen, then Minister of the Interior, put an end to the movement for expropriation.

Out of his early work with the Doukhobors, Mavor became acquainted with Count Leo Tolstoy. They exchanged letters in 1898, and Tolstoy's son Sergius stayed with the Mavors in Toronto in 1899. In the summer of that year Mavor made his first visit to Yasnaya Polyana. This and his subsequent visit are described in some detail in *"My Windows on the Street of the World."* At the time of the second visit Tolstoy was living with a daughter and two months later was to leave home forever. Mavor's intense interest in Tolstoy extended to a study of the latter's revolt against the old regime, a revolt which resembled that of the peasants. Dissatisfied with

the material available in English he learned Russian, and not withstanding his relative isolation in Toronto embarked on a wide exploration of Russian literature, economics and history. He discovered an imperative. All his struggles against social injustice and his early fascination with Russia learned from his mother seem to have come together in a driving passion to achieve what would become the apogee of his career. Out of these researches emerged his definitive books which have become classics, *An Economic History of Russia*, 1914, and *The Russian Revolution* published posthumously in 1928.

The last of his strength was expended on a second edition of *The Economic history of Russia* and on *The Russian Revolution*. He died in 1925 while working on these books, "a victim of his splendid and untiring energy," to quote his old friend, Sir Patrick Geddes. In a moving tribute to Mavor, Geddes says:

> *"The Canadian notices especially do justice to his vast and varied experience of life in its many interests and activities, and these range across and through the world. Yet even these fall short in their interpretations. They see the amazing versatility of the man, through industries and arts, or from chess to Chinese institutions; and, similarly, the wide acquaintance with active men and minds from America to Russia, and, indeed, throughout the intermediate countries. The main key to his variety of interests and contacts is also seen in his fullness of human sympathy, kept up and ever extending through life, among all sorts and conditions of men — as in youth in Scotland, from simplest village and country neighbours up to his rare student friendship with the towering intellectuality of Lord Kelvin, and again in later years ranging from the simple peasant Doukhobors ... to their greatest countrymen, like Kropotkin and Tolstoi. But even rarer than this fullness of human sympathy was his clear and penetrating intellect, his piercing insight, which made him not only interested in all things and all men, but fascinatingly and even humorously interpretative too. His grasp of industry was thus that of the truly artistic spirit: his economics was moralised, because humanised. So no wonder in our modern Universities, each too much a Babel of Specialisms, too much apart, he was an admired yet puzzling figure. Such men are never common, but have been especially rare in our day; since without, of course, claiming for him the genius of Leonardo or of Goethe, he expressed the comprehensive range of their cultural interests beyond any other man I know of in our times."*

Exhibition organized and arranged by Rachel Grover, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

Pamphlet compiled by Rachel Grover and Francis W. Mavor Moore.

Grateful acknowledgement is given to Dr. Alan Bowker for special permission to read his recent thesis, *"Truly Useful Men, Maurice Hutton, George Wrong, James Mavor and the University of Toronto, 1880-1927."*